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Religion as Philosophy and Art in the Work of Lucian Blaga

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Abstract: This article introduces the thought of the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga on religion as a cultural creation that has value apart from questions of the truthfulness of religious doctrines. According to Blaga, religion has considerable aesthetic and philosophical significance. The article places this insight within the context of Blaga's metaphysical vision and his analysis of epistemology and illustrates it with a new translation of one of his most famous poems.

For those few present who may not have heard of Lucian Blaga, I am talking today about a Transylvania-born poet, playwright, and philosopher who taught at the University of Cluj until he was blacklisted by the Communists in 1948. He passed away in 1961. In my opinion, Blaga is the greatest Romanian philosopher. The famous Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade seems to share my sentiment, for he called Blaga "The most gifted and critical original thinker" in the history of Romanian philosophy.¹ The subject of this conference being *Religion and Spirituality in Literature and the Arts*, and the conference taking place in the capital city of Romania, it seems highly appropriate to give some consideration to what Blaga, the greatest Romanian philosopher, had to say on the subject.

It is well known that Blaga had a keen interest in art. He himself was an artist, of sorts: he was a poet, playwright, and novelist of considerable acclaim. His philosophical *oeuvre* contains five books on aesthetics: *Probleme estetice* (Esthetic Problems), *Artă și Valoare* (Art and Value), *Filosofia stilului* (The Philosophy of Style), *Fețele unui veac* (The Faces of an Age), and *Ferestre colorate* (Painted Windows). In addition, it contains five volumes on philosophy of culture: *Orizont și stil* (Horizon and Style), *Spațiul mioritic* (The Ewe Space), *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii* (The Genesis of Metaphor and the Meaning of Culture), *Cultura și Cunoștința* (Culture and Knowledge), and *Scriseri despre artă* (Writings about Art).²

Blaga also had an enduring personal and professional interest in deep philosophical understanding. He taught philosophy at the Romanian University of Cluj (as it was then named) from 1938 until he was ousted by the Communists. He published over 20 books of philosophy during his lifetime, with another dozen published posthumously. The list of his published articles is very long indeed, and new books about Blaga's philosophical ideas continue to appear annually, over 50 years after his death.

These facts about Blaga are well known. It may be less well known that he was also very interested in religion. His father and grandfathers were priests. His undergraduate degree was in Orthodox theology from the seminary in Sibiu. And he authored several books on religion, most

¹ Mircea Eliade, "Rumanian Philosophy," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967), 233–34.

² The last is an anthology of Blaga's writings on art and aesthetics edited by Dumitru Micu and published in 1970.

notably *Religie și Spirit* (Religion and Spirit)(which latter formed part of the book *Gândirea Magică și Religie* [Magical Thought and Religion]) and *Curs de Filosofie Religioasă* (Course on the Philosophy of Religion).³

Blaga had an on-again off-again relationship with Romanian Orthodoxy. To one trained in Protestant theology, the influence of Orthodoxy virtually shouts from the pages of Blaga's philosophical writing. His frequent reference to the transcendent "Great Anonymous," his creation myth, his emphasis on mystery and the limits imposed on human cognition, his discussions of metaphor and use of nearly iconic imagery, and many other elements were, consciously or not, inspired by or derived from Eastern Orthodoxy.

The other side of this coin is Blaga's polemic with Dumitru Stăniloie and other Romanian Orthodox theologians. Blaga denied the deity of Christ and was skeptical about the claim that the Bible is divine revelation. This did not sit well with Orthodox intellectuals, and the resulting confrontation played out in speeches, articles, and books that attacked and defended both sides and sometimes verged toward the *ad hominem*. The dispute between Blaga and Orthodoxy does not seem to have soured Blaga's attitude toward religion, though. His writing on religion is always objective, even scientific, and his theory of religions is respectful and even appreciative.

Blaga's cosmological vision, in a nutshell, is that a transcendent entity, variously called the Great Anonymous, the Anonymous Fund, Creator, Generator, and occasionally God, is the cause of all else that exists. This creator generates the universe in an essentially neo-Platonic fashion, emitting infinitesimals that then interact and combine to produce the subatomic particles that constitute the universe. Through strategies including "differentiated creation," "transcendent censorship," and "stylistic braking" the creator limits this process, preventing it from destabilizing the universe in any way.

Epistemologically speaking, the latter two of these processes prevent humans from ever perfectly understanding their world. However, our drive to fathom even the impenetrable mysteries of existence fuels our endless creativity, both scientific and artistic. One result of this is religion.

Religion, according to Blaga, is a creative attempt to surpass the limits of the human condition and to penetrate the most ultimate of existential mysteries. It is a uniquely human creative attempt to transcend who and what we are.⁴ And although our creator is responsible for our

³ The latter was published posthumously from his lecture notes for the eponymous course that he taught at the University of Cluj. He also has a little book titled *Spiritualități Creștine* (Christian Spiritualities) that was published in Germany during Communism (1959). It contains an introduction titled „Ortodoxie și Romăniism” (Orthodoxy and Romanianism) by D. C. Amzăr and three chapters taken from *Religie și spirit: „Spiritualități bipolare”* (Bipolar Spiritualities), „Transcendentul care coboară” (The Transcendent that Descends), and „Perspectiva sofianică” (The Perspective of the Descended Transcendent).

⁴ Lucian Blaga, *Gândirea Magică și Religie, in Opere vol 10, ed. Dorli Blaga* (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1987) 470. As Alexandru Tănase points out, this definition is liable to be viewed as unacceptable by many religious practitioners, since it seems to humanize and secularize religion.

finitude and limitations and hence for our inability to grasp the transcendent, it is also our creator who has endowed us with the drive toward it. This is one of the creator's strategies for continuing the creation process: we are the creator's hands and feet. Through us creation continues.

If Blaga has any area of specialization within philosophy, I would say that it is the philosophy of culture, which is an aspect of philosophy that has received insufficient attention in English-speaking academia. The chair that Blaga held at the University of Cluj was a chair in philosophy of culture created especially for him. His whole philosophical system can be viewed as a very elaborate philosophy of culture. Hence it should be no surprise that Blaga views religions as cultural phenomena. According to Blaga, a religion is just as much a product of culture as are the other creative products of that culture – its music, paintings, architecture, philosophies, etc.

This too caused unease for Orthodox thinkers. But Blaga did not mean it in a depreciative fashion. To Blaga, cultural creations are the height of human activity. They are attempts to get all that we can out of ourselves, to draw as close to perfectly understanding or expressing ultimate reality as is humanly possible, to grasp God, love, joy, anguish, and others the way that God, love, joy, anguish, and others understand themselves. Cultural creations are the pinnacle of the human experience.

In his book *Eonul dogmatic* (The Dogmatic Age), which contains some of his key epistemological insights, Blaga discusses an approach to knowledge acquisition that he calls "minus-cognition." This is an epistemological strategy sometimes seen in philosophy, science, and religion. Its goal is to attenuate the unknown aspects of some cognitive problem by "chipping away at it," so to speak: by finding a theoretical explanation of the unknown that, while not explaining it completely, does provide a measure of additional understanding. Mystery is never fully removed via minus-cognition, but nonetheless the process yields new insights into the unknown. Some religious thought operates through this process. Most religion – whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist – involves an attempt to understand the transcendent. In theology and in the writings of the mystics religion waxes philosophical in the attempt to erect a ladder into the sky. While the religions recognize that the object of their adoration transcends their finite and fallible human faculties, they cannot resist creating doctrines and beliefs that attempt to overcome this very fact. And in Blaga's vision this is not bad: it is a result of our nature abutting the precautions put in place by our creator.

This fascination combined with frustration when faced with impenetrable mystery is reflected in one of Blaga's most famous poems, "Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii" (I do not trample the world's halo of wonders):

I do not trample the world's halo of wonders
nor do I kill with my mind
the mysteries that I find
along my way

in flowers and eyes, on lips or graves.

The light of others
the spell of the unfathomed smothers
in the depths of darkness.

But I,
I grow the secrets of the world with my light -
and just as the moonlight white,
does not suppress, but quivering,
powerfully increases the secrets of night,
so I enrich the dark horizon
with tremors of sacred mystery.

And all that's not understood
transforms into mystery before me-
for I love flowers and eyes, lips and graves.⁵

However, religion is much more than a set of doctrines. It is also a community with a set of rituals that facilitate societal activities such as worship and that guide the assault on transcendence. And it involves a strong aesthetic sense, a sense of propriety and fit that is perhaps best described using the terminology of the fine arts. For both worship and theology are creative, artistic enterprises. Here Blaga's aesthetic theory and his philosophy of culture inform his thinking about religion. Even when religion fails to correctly understand ultimate existential mysteries, when it teaches *as true* doctrines that do not precisely correspond to reality, or when it worships an idea of the transcendent that has become an idol that replaces the awareness of transcendence, it still has value. For like philosophy and the arts, religion is not valuable because it perfectly grasps its object, but rather it is valuable as a channel by way of which we grasp AT our object. It is the reach, not the grasp, that is most important to Blaga. For even if we never arrive at our destination, it is better to have set out on the path than to have never risen from the chair.

Blaga's epistemology discusses a variety of ways in which beliefs and belief-forming processes are justified. Prominent among these are a pragmatic justification based on the utility of some belief when put into practice and an aesthetic sense of fit. Concordant with this, Blaga sees religion as justified pragmatically as a genuinely human attempt to wrestle with the big questions of life and as justified aesthetically for the frequent beauty of its theoretical and material creations. In short, religion is philosophy and religion is art. And as such religion is justified in the thought of Romania's greatest philosopher.

Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii
și nu ucid

⁵ My own translation.

cu mintea tainele, ce le-ntâlnesc
în calea mea
în flori, în ochi, pe buze ori morminte.

Lumina altora
sugrumă vraja nepătrunsului ascuns
în adâncimi de întuneric,
dar eu,
eu cu lumina mea sporesc a lumii taină –
și-ntocmai cum cu razele ei albe luna
nu micșorează, ci tremurătoare
mărește și mai tare taina nopții,
așa înbogățesc și eu întunecata zare
cu largi fiori de sfânt mister
și tot ce-i neînțeles
se schimbă-n neînțelesuri și mai mari
sub ochii mei-
căci eu iubesc
și flori și ochi și buze și morminte.⁶

⁶ Lucian Blaga, "Eu Nu Strivesc Corola de Minuni a Lumii," *Opera Poetică*, ed. George Gană and Dorli Blaga (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 1995), 33.

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